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AVON'S HARVEST

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Poems

THE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT
CAPTAIN CRAIG
THE TOWN DOWN THE RIVER
THE MAN AGAINST THE SKY
MERLIN
LANCELOT
THE THREE TAVERNS

Plays

VAN ZORN. A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS
THE PORCUPINE. A DRAMA IN THREE ACTS

AVON'S HARVEST

BY

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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TO

SETH ELLIS POPE

AVON'S HARVEST

Fear, like a living fire that only death
Might one day cool, had now in Avon's eyes
Been witness for so long of an invasion
That made of a gay friend whom we had known
Almost a memory, wore no other name
As yet for us than fear. Another man
Than Avon might have given to us at least
A futile opportunity for words
We might regret. But Avon, since it happened,
Fed with his unrevealing reticence
The fire of death we saw that horribly

Consumed him while he crumbled and said nothing.
So many a time had I been on the edge,
And off again, of a foremeasured fall
Into the darkness and discomfiture
Of his oblique rebuff, that finally
My silence honored his, holding itself
Away from a gratuitous intrusion
That likely would have widened a new distance
Already wide enough, if not so new.
But there are seeming parallels in space
That may converge in time; and so it was
I walked with Avon, fought and pondered with him,
While he made out a case for So-and-so,
Or slaughtered What's-his-name in his old way,
With a new difference. Nothing in Avon lately
Was, or was ever again to be for us,

Like him that we remembered; and all the while
We saw that fire at work within his eyes
And had no glimpse of what was burning there.

So for a year it went; and so it went
For half another year — when, all at once,
At someone's tinkling afternoon at home
I saw that in the eyes of Avon's wife
The fire that I had met the day before
In his had found another living fuel.
To look at her and then to think of him,
And thereupon to contemplate the fall
Of a dim curtain over the dark end
Of a dark play, required of me no more
Clairvoyance than a man who cannot swim
Will exercise in seeing that his friend
Off shore will drown except he save himself.

To her I could say nothing, and to him
No more than tallied with a long belief
That I should only have it back again
For my chagrin to ruminate upon,
Ingloriously, for the still time it starved;
And that would be for me as long a time
As I remembered Avon — who is yet
Not quite forgotten. On the other hand,
For saying nothing I might have with me always
An injured and recriminating ghost
Of a dead friend. The more I pondered it
The more I knew there was not much to lose,
Albeit for one whose delving hitherto
Had been a forage of his own affairs,
The quest, however golden the reward,
Was irksome — and as Avon suddenly
And soon was driven to let me see, was needless.

It seemed an age ago that we were there
One evening in the room that in the days
When they could laugh he called the Library.
" He calls it that, you understand," she said,
" Because the dictionary always lives here.
He's not a man of books, yet he can read,
And write. He learned it all at school."— He smiled,
And answered with a fervor that rang then
Superfluous: " Had I learned a little more
At school, it might have been as well for me."
And I remembered now that he paused then,
Leaving a silence that one had to break.
But this was long ago, and there was now
No laughing in that house. We were alone
This time, and it was Avon's time to talk.

I waited, and anon became aware
That I was looking less at Avon's eyes
Than at another thing that had a gleam
Quite of its own. "And what the devil's that?"
I questioned.—"Only what you see," said Avon;
"Merely a dagger on a dictionary.
Daggers are out of date, but there you are.
Take it; and if you like it, shave with it."

"If that's the merry best that you can do,
My friend," said I, willing to lay it back,
"I recommend that you be serious."—
"You are the judge and only arbiter
Of that," said he; "and that's why you are here.
Your name is Resignation for an hour,
So be resigned. I shall not praise your work,
Or strive in any way to make you happy.

My purpose only is to make you know
How clearly I have known that you have known
There was a reason waited on your coming,
And, if it's in me to see clear enough,
To fish the reason out of a black well
Where you see only a dim sort of glimmer
That has for you no light."
"I see the well,"
I said, "but there's a doubt about the glimmer —
Say nothing of the light. I'm at your service;
And though you say that I shall not be happy,
I shall be if in some way I may serve.
To tell you fairly now that I know nothing
Is nothing more than fair."—"You know as much
As any man alive — save only one man,
If he's alive. Whether he lives or not
Is rather for time to answer than for me;

And that's a reason, or a part of one,
For your appearance here. You do not know him,
And even if you should pass him in the street
He might go by without your feeling him
Between you and the world. I cannot say
For sure he would, but I suppose he might."

" And I suppose you might, if urged," I said,
" Say in what water it is that we are fishing.
You that have reasons hidden in a well,
Daggers on dictionaries, men that walk
The streets and are not either dead or living
For company, are surely, one would say
To be forgiven if you may seem distraught —
I mean distrait. I don't know what I mean.
I only know that I am at your service,
And that your ornament there on the book

Is not at all a proper toy for children.
We're not exactly in the nursery now,
I know — though I may soon be there myself.
Unless your living dead man comes to life,
Or is less indiscriminately dead,
I shall go home."

"No, you will not go home,"
Said Avon; "or I beg that you will not."
So saying, he went slowly to the door
And turned the key. "Forgive me and my manners,
But I would be alone with you this evening.
The key, as you observe, is in the lock;
And you may sit between me and the door,
Or where you will. And if that thing annoys you,
Take it, and hide it. I'm not using it.

It's there merely by way of illustration."

"If there are to be many of them like that,
We'll as well have your tale without your pictures,"
I told him. "I am not much given to nerves,
But that thing savors of experience
Too surely, and of active intimacies
Too sharply. But no matter; the Lord giveth,
The Lord taketh away. I trust myself
Always to you and to your courtesy.
Only remember that I cling somewhat
Affectionately to the old tradition."—
"I understand you and your part," said Avon;
"And I dare say it's well enough, tonight,
We play around the circumstance a little.
I've read of men that half way to the stake

Would have their little joke. It's well enough;
Rather a waste of time, but well enough."

I listened as I waited, and heard steps
Outside of one who paused and then went on;
And, having heard, I might as well have seen
The fear in his wife's eyes. He gazed away,
As I could see, in helpless thought of her,
And said to me: "Well, then, it was like this.
Some tales will have a deal of going back
In them before they are begun. But this one
Begins in the beginning — when he came.
I was a boy at school, sixteen years old,
And on my way, in all appearances,
To mark an even-tempered average
Among the major mediocrities
Who serve and earn with no especial noise

Or vast reward. I saw myself, even then,
A light for no high shining; and I feared
No boy or man — having, in truth, no cause.
I was enough a leader to be free,
And not enough a hero to be jealous.
Having eyes and ears, I knew that I was envied,
And as a proper sort of compensation
Had envy of my own for two or three —
But never felt, and surely never gave,
The wound of any more malevolence
Than decent youth, defeated for a day,
May take to bed with him and kill with sleep.
So, and so far, my days were going well,
And would have gone so, but for the black tiger
That many of us fancy is in waiting,
But waits for most of us in fancy only.
For me there was no fancy in his coming,

Though God knows I had never summoned him,
Or thought of him. To this day I'm adrift
And in the dark, out of all reckoning,
To find a reason why he ever was,
Or what was ailing Fate when he was born
On this alleged God-ordered earth of ours.
Now and again there comes one of his ilk —
By chance, we say. I leave all that to you.
Whether it was an evil chance alone,
Or some invidious juggling of the stars,
Or some accrued arrears of ancestors
Who throve on debts that I was here to pay,
Or sins within me that I knew not of,
Or just a foretaste of what waits in hell
For those of us who cannot love a worm,—
Whatever it was, or whence or why it was,
One day there came a stranger to the school.

And having had one mordacious glimpse of him
That filled my eyes and was to fill my life,

I have known Peace only as one more word
Among the many others we say over
That have an airy credit of no meaning.
One of these days, if I were seeing many
To live, I might erect a cenotaph
To Job's wife. I assume that you remember;
If you forget, she's extant in your Bible."

Now this was not the language of a man
Whom I had known as Avon, and I winced
Hearing it — though I knew that in my heart
There was no visitation of surprise.
Unwelcome as it was, and off the key
Calamitously, it overlived a silence
That was itself a story and affirmed

A savage emphasis of honesty
That I would only gladly have attuned
If possible, to vinous innovation.
But his indifferent wassailing was always
Too far within the measure of excess
For that; and then there were those eyes of his.
Avon indeed had kept his word with me,
And there was not much yet to make me happy.

"So there we were," he said, "we two together,
Breathing one air. And how shall I go on
To say by what machinery the slow net
Of my fantastic and increasing hate
Was ever woven as it was around us?
I cannot answer; and you need not ask
What undulating reptile he was like,
For such a worm as I discerned in him

Was never yet on earth or in the ocean,
Or anywhere else than in my sense of him.
Had all I made of him been tangible,
The Lord must have invented long ago
Some private and unspeakable new monster
Equipped for such a thing's extermination;
Whereon the monster, seeing no other monster
Worth biting, would have died with his work done.
There's a humiliation in it now,
As there was then, and worse than there was then;
For then there was the boy to shoulder it
Without the sickening weight of added years
Galling him to the grave. Beware of hate
That has no other boundary than the grave
Made for it, or for ourselves. Beware, I say;
And I'm a sorry one, I fear, to say it,
Though for the moment we may let that go.

And while I'm interrupting my own story
I'll ask of you the favor of a look
Into the street. I like it when it's empty.
There's only one man walking? Let him walk.
I wish to God that all men might walk always,
And so, being busy, love one another more."

"Avon," I said, now in my chair again,
"Although I may not be here to be happy,
If you are careless, I may have to laugh.
I have disliked a few men in my life,
But never to the scope of wishing them
To this particular pedestrian hell
Of your affection. I should not like that.
Forgive me, for this time it was your fault."

He drummed with all his fingers on his chair,

And, after a made smile of acquiescence,
Took up again the theme of his aversion,
Which now had flown along with him alone
For twenty years, like Io's evil insect,
To sting him when it would. The decencies
Forbade that I should look at him for ever,
Yet many a time I found myself ashamed
Of a long staring at him, and as often
Essayed another focus, preferably
That least engaging of exotic steel,
Which in the distance, on the dictionary,
Shone, I conceived, with something of the fire
That lived in Avon's eye. At other times
There might be cold things creeping in my hair,
At which my scalp would shrink,— at which, again,
I would arouse myself with a vain scorn,

Remembering that all this was in New York —
As if that were somehow the banishing
For ever of all unseemly presences —
And listen to the story of my friend,
Who, as I feared, was not for me to save,
And, as I knew, knew also that I feared it.

"Humiliation," he began again,
"May be or not the best of all bad names
I might employ; and if you scent remorse,
There may be growing such a flower as that
In the unsightly garden where I planted,
Not knowing the seed or what was coming of it.
I've done much wondering if I planted it;
But our poor wonder, when it comes too late,
Fights with a lath, and one that solid fact
Breaks while it yawns and looks another way

For a less negligible adversary.
Away with wonder, then; though I'm at odds
With conscience, even tonight, for good assurance
That it was I, or chance and I together,
Did all that sowing. If I seem to you
To be a little bitten by the question,
Without a miracle it might be true;
The miracle is to me that I'm not eaten
Long since to death of it, and that you sit
With nothing more agreeable than a ghost.
If you had thought a while of that, you might,
Unhappily, not have come; and your not coming
Would have been desolation — not for you,
God save the mark! — for I would have you here.
I shall not be alone with you to listen;
And I should be far less alone tonight
With you away, make what you will of that.

I said that we were going back to school,
And we may say that we are there — with him.
This fellow had no friend, and, as for that,
No sign of an apparent need of one,
Save always and alone — myself. He fixed
His heart and eyes on me, insufferably,—
And in a sort of Nemesis-like way,
Invincibly. Others who might have given
A welcome even to him, or I'll suppose so —
Adorning an unfortified assumption
With gold that might come off with afterthought —
Got never, if anything, more out of him
Than a word flung like refuse in their faces,
And rarely that. For God knows what good reason,
He lavished his whole altered arrogance
On me; and with an overweening skill,

Which had sometimes almost a cringing in it,
Found a few flaws in my tight mail of hate
And slowly pricked a poison into me
In which at first I failed at recognizing
An unfamiliar subtle sort of pity.
But so it was, and I believe he knew it;
Though even to dream it would have been absurd —
Until I knew it, and there was no need
Of dreaming. For the fellow's indolence,
And his malignant oily swarthiness
Housing a reptile blood that I could see
Beneath it, like hereditary venom
Out of old human swamps, hardly revealed
Itself the proper spawning-ground of pity.
But so it was. Pity, or something like it,
Was in the poison of his proximity;

For nothing else that I have any name for
Could have invaded and so mastered me
With a slow tolerance that eventually
Assumed a blind ascendency of custom
That saw not even itself. When I came in,
Often I'd find him strewn along my couch
Like an amorphous lizard with its clothes on,
Reading a book and waiting for its dinner.
His clothes were always odiously in order,
Yet I should not have thought of him as clean —
Not even if he had washed himself to death
Proving it. There was nothing right about him.
Then he would search, never quite satisfied,
Though always in a measure confident,
My eyes to find a welcome waiting in them,
Unwilling, as I see him now, to know
That it would never be there. Looking back,

I am not sure that he would not have died
For me, if I were drowning or on fire,
Or that I would not rather have let myself
Die twice than owe the debt of my survival
To him, though he had lost not even his clothes.
No, there was nothing right about that fellow;
And after twenty years to think of him
I should be quite as helpless now to serve him
As I was then. I mean — without my story.
Be patient, and you'll see just what I mean —
Which is to say, you won't. But you can listen,
And that's itself a large accomplishment
Uncrowned; and may be, at a time like this,
A mighty charity. It was in January
This evil genius came into our school,
And it was June when he went out of it —
If I may say that he was wholly out

Of any place that I was in thereafter.
But he was not yet gone. When we are told
By Fate to bear what we may never bear,
Fate waits a little while to see what happens;
And this time it was only for the season
Between the swift midwinter holidays
And the long progress into weeks and months
Of all the days that followed — with him there
To make them longer. I would have given an eye,
Before the summer came, to know for certain
That I should never be condemned again
To see him with the other; and all the while
There was a battle going on within me
Of hate that fought remorse — if you must have it —
Never to win, . . . never to win but once,

And having won, to lose disastrously,
And as it was to prove, interminably —
Or till an end of living may annul,
If so it be, the nameless obligation
That I have not the Christian revenue
In me to pay. A man who has no gold,
Or an equivalent, shall pay no gold
Until by chance or labor or contrivance
He makes it his to pay; and he that has
No kindlier commodity than hate,
Glossed with a pity that belies itself
In its negation and lacks alchemy
To fuse itself to — love, would you have me say?
I don't believe it. No, there is no such word.
If I say tolerance, there's no more to say.
And he who sickens even in saying that —
What coin of God has he to pay the toll

To peace on earth? Good will to men — oh, yes!
That's easy; and it means no more than sap,
Until we boil the water out of it
Over the fire of sacrifice. I'll do it;
And in a measurable way I've done it —
But not for him. What are you smiling at?
Well, so it went until a day in June.
We were together under an old elm,
Which now, I hope, is gone — though it's a crime
In me that I should have to wish the death
Of such a tree as that. There were no trees
Like those that grew at school — until he came.
We stood together under it that day,
When he, by some ungovernable chance,
All foreign to the former crafty care
That he had used never to cross my favor,
Told of a lie that stained a friend of mine

With a false blot that a few days washed off.
A trifle now, but a boy's honor then —
Which then was everything. There were some words
Between us, but I don't remember them.
All I remember is a bursting flood
Of half a year's accumulated hate,
And his incredulous eyes before I struck him.
He had gone once too far; and when he knew it,
He knew it was all over; and I struck him.
Pound for pound, he was the better brute;
But bulking in the way then of my fist
And all there was alive in me to drive it,
Three of him misbegotten into one
Would have gone down like him — and being larger,
Might have bled more, if that were necessary.

He came up soon; and if I live for ever,
The vengeance in his eyes, and a weird gleam
Of desolation — if I make you see it —
Will be before me as it is tonight.
I shall not ever know how long it was
I waited his attack that never came;
It might have been an instant or an hour
That I stood ready there, watching his eyes,
And the tears running out of them. They made
Me sick, those tears; for I knew, miserably,
They were not there for any pain he felt.
I do not think he felt the pain at all.
He felt the blow. . . . Oh, the whole thing was
bad —
So bad that even the bleaching suns and rains
Of years that wash away to faded lines,
Or blot out wholly, the sharp wrongs and ills

Of youth, have had no cleansing agent in them
To dim the picture. I still see him going
Away from where I stood; and I shall see him
Longer, sometime, than I shall see the face
Of whosoever watches by the bed
On which I die — given I die that way.
I doubt if he could reason his advantage
In living any longer after that
Among the rest of us. The lad he slandered,
Or gave a negative immunity
No better than a stone he might have thrown
Behind him at his head, was of the few
I might have envied; and for that being known,
My fury became sudden history,
And I a sudden hero. But the crown
I wore was hot; and I would happily
Have hurled it, if I could, so far away

That over my last hissing glimpse of it
There might have closed an ocean. He went home
The next day, and the same unhappy chance
That first had fettered me and my aversion
To his unprofitable need of me
Brought us abruptly face to face again
Beside the carriage that had come for him.
We met, and for a moment we were still —
Together. But I was reading in his eyes
More than I read at college or at law
In years that followed. There was blankly nothing
For me to say, if not that I was sorry;
And that was more than hate would let me say —
Whatever the truth might be. At last he spoke,
And I could see the vengeance in his eyes,

And a cold sorrow — which, if I had seen
Much more of it might yet have mastered me.
But I would see no more of it. 'Well, then,'
He said, 'have you thought yet of anything
Worth saying? If so, there's time. If you are
silent,
I shall know where you are until you die.'
I can still hear him saying those words to me
Again, without a loss or an addition;
I know, for I have heard them ever since.
And there was in me not an answer for them
Save a new roiling silence. Once again
I met his look, and on his face I saw
There was a twisting in the swarthiness
That I had often sworn to be the cast
Of his ophidian mind. He had no soul.
There was to be no more of him — not then.

The carriage rolled away with him inside,
Leaving the two of us alive together
In the same hemisphere to hate each other.
I don't know now whether he's here alive,
Or whether he's here dead. But that, of course,
As you would say, is only a tired man's fancy.
You know that I have driven the wheels too fast
Of late, and all for gold I do not need.
When are we mortals to be sensible,
Paying no more for life than life is worth?
Better for us, no doubt, we do not know
How much we pay or what it is we buy."
He waited, gazing at me as if asking
The worth of what the universe had for sale
For one confessed remorse. Avon, I knew,
Had driven the wheels too fast, but not for gold.

"If you had given him then your hand," I said,
"And spoken, though it strangled you, the truth,
I should not have the melancholy honor
Of sitting here alone with you this evening.
If only you had shaken hands with him,
And said the truth, he would have gone his way,
And you your way. He might have wished you dead,
But he would not have made you miserable.
At least," I added, indefensibly,
"That's what I hope is true."

He pitied me,
But had the magnanimity not to say so.
"If only we had shaken hands," he said,
"And I had said the truth, we might have been
In half a moment rolling on the gravel.

If I had said the truth, I should have said
That never at any moment on the clock
Above us in the tower since his arrival
Had I been in a more proficient mood
To throttle him. If you had seen his eyes
As I did, and if you had seen his face
At work as I did, you might understand.
I was ashamed of it, as I am now,
But that's the prelude to another theme;
For now I'm saying only what had happened
If I had taken his hand and said the truth.
The wise have cautioned us that where there's hate
There's also fear. The wise are right sometimes.
There may be now, but there was no fear then.
There was just hatred, hauled up out of hell
For me to writhe in; and I writhed in it."

I saw that he was writhing in it still;
But having a magnanimity myself,
I waited. There was nothing else to do
But wait, and to remember that his tale,
Though nearly done, as I divined it was,
Yet hovered among shadows and regrets
Of twenty years ago. When he began
Again to speak, I felt them coming nearer.

"Whenever your poet or your philosopher
Has nothing richer for us," he resumed,
"He burrows among remnants, like a mouse
In a waste-basket, and with much dry noise
Comes up again, having found Time at the bottom
And filled himself with its futility.
'Time is at once,' he says, to startle us,
'A poison for us, if we make it so,

And, if we make it so, an antidote
For the same poison that afflicted us.'
I'm witness to the poison, but the cure
Of my complaint is not, for me, in Time.
There may be doctors in eternity
To deal with it, but they are not here now.
There's no specific for my three diseases
That I could swallow, even if I should find it,
And I shall never find it here on earth."

" Mightn't it be as well, my friend," I said
" For you to contemplate the uncompleted
With not such an infernal certainty? "

" And mightn't it be as well for you, my friend,"
Said Avon, " to be quiet while I go on?
When I am done, then you may talk all night —

Like a physician who can do no good,
But knows how soon another would have his fee
Were he to tell the truth. Your fee for this
Is in my gratitude and my affection;
And I'm not eager to be calling in
Another to take yours away from you,
Whatever it's worth. I like to think I know.
Well then, again. The carriage rolled away
With him inside; and so it might have gone
For ten years rolling on, with him still in it,
For all it was I saw of him. Sometimes
I heard of him, but only as one hears
Of leprosy in Boston or New York
And wishes it were somewhere else. He faded
Out of my scene — yet never quite out of it:
'I shall know where you are until you die,'
Were his last words; and they are the same words

That I received thereafter once a year,
Infallibly on my birthday, with no name;
Only a card, and the words printed on it.
No, I was never rid of him — not quite;
Although on shipboard, on my way from here
To Hamburg, I believe that I forgot him.
But once ashore, I should have been half ready
To meet him there, risen up out of the ground,
With hoofs and horns and tail and everything.
Believe me, there was nothing right about him,
Though it was not in Hamburg that I found him.
Later, in Rome, it was we found each other,
For the first time since we had been at school.
There was the same slow vengeance in his eyes
When he saw mine, and there was a vicious twist
On his amphibious face that might have been
On anything else a smile — rather like one

We look for on the stage than in the street.
I must have been a yard away from him
Yet as we passed I felt the touch of him
Like that of something soft in a dark room.
There's hardly need of saying that we said
nothing,
Or that we gave each other an occasion
For more than our eyes uttered. He was gone
Before I knew it, like a solid phantom;
And his reality was for me some time
In its achievement — given that one's to be
Convinced that such an incubus at large
Was ever quite real. The season was upon us
When there are fitter regions in the world —
Though God knows he would have been safe
enough —
Than Rome for strayed Americans to live in,

And when the whips of their itineraries
Hurry them north again. I took my time,
Since I was paying for it, and leisurely
Went where I would — though never again to move
Without him at my elbow or behind me.
My shadow of him, wherever I found myself
Might horribly as well have been the man —
Although I should have been afraid of him
No more than of a large worm in a salad.
I should omit the salad, certainly,
And wish the worm elsewhere. And so he was,
In fact; yet as I go on to grow older,
I question if there's anywhere a fact
That isn't the malevolent existence
Of one man who is dead, or is not dead,
Or what the devil it is that he may be.
There must be, I suppose, a fact somewhere,

But I don't know it. I can only tell you
That later, when to all appearances
I stood outside a music-hall in London,
I felt him and then saw that he was there.
Yes, he was there, and had with him a woman
Who looked as if she didn't know. I'm sorry
To this day for that woman — who, no doubt,
Is doing well. Yes, there he was again;
There were his eyes and the same vengeance in them
That I had seen in Rome and twice before —
Not mentioning all the time, or most of it,
Between the day I struck him and that evening.
That was the worst show that I ever saw,
But you had better see it for yourself
Before you say so too. I went away,
Though not for any fear that I could feel

Of him or of his worst manipulations,
But only to be out of the same air
That made him stay alive in the same world
With all the gentlemen that were in irons
For uncommendable extravagances
That I should reckon slight compared with his
Offence of being. Distance would have made him
A moving fly-speck on the map of life,—
But he would not be distant, though his flesh
And bone might have been climbing Fujiyama
Or Chimborazo — with me there in London,
Or sitting here. My doom it was to see him,
Be where I might. That was ten years ago;
And having waited season after season
His always imminent evil recrudescence,
And all for nothing, I was waiting still,
When the *Titanic* touched a piece of ice

And we were for a moment where we are,
With nature laughing at us. When the noise
Had spent itself to names, his was among them;
And I will not insult you or myself
With a vain perjury. I was far from cold.
It seemed as for the first time in my life
I knew the blessedness of being warm;
And I remember that I had a drink,
Having assuredly no need of it.
And after that there were no messages
In ambush waiting for me on my birthday.
There was no vestige yet of any fear,
You understand — if that's why you are smiling."

I said that I had not so much as whispered
The name aloud of any fear soever,
And that I smiled at his unwonted plunge

Into the perilous pool of Dionysus.

"Well, if you are so easily diverted

As that," he said, drumming his chair again,

"You will be pleased, I think, with what is coming;

And though there be divisions and departures,

Imminent from now on, for your diversion

I'll do the best I can. More to the point,

I know a man who if his friends were like him

Would live in the woods all summer and all winter,

Leaving the town and its iniquities

To die of their own dust. But having his wits,

Henceforth he may conceivably avoid

The adventure unattended. Last October

He took me with him into the Maine woods,

Where, by the shore of a primeval lake,

With woods all round it, and a voyage away

From anything wearing clothes, he had reared
somehow
A lodge, or camp, with a stone chimney in it,
And a wide fireplace to make men forget
Their sins who sat before it in the evening,
Hearing the wind outside among the trees
And the black water washing on the shore.
I never knew the meaning of October
Until I went with Asher to that place,
Which I shall not investigate again
Till I be taken there by other forces
Than are innate in my economy.
'You may not like it,' Asher said, 'but Asher
Knows what is good. So put your faith in Asher,
And come along with him.' He's an odd bird,
Yet I could wish for the world's decency
There might be more of him. And so it was

I found myself, at first incredulous,
Down there with Asher in the wilderness,
Alive at last with a new liberty
And with no sore to fester. He perceived
In me an altered favor of God's works,
And promptly took upon himself the credit,
Which, in à fashion, was as accurate
As one's interpretation of another
Is like to be. So for a frosty fortnight
We had the sunlight with us on the lake,
And the moon with us when the sun was down.
'God gave his adjutants a holiday,'
Asher assured me, 'when He made this place';
And I agreed with him that it was heaven,—
Till it was hell for me for then and after.
There was a village miles away from us
Where now and then we paddled for the mail

And incidental small commodities
That perfect exile might require, and stayed
The night after the voyage with an antique
Survival of a broader world than ours
Whom Asher called The Admiral. This time,
A little out of sorts and out of tune
With paddling, I let Asher go alone,
Sure that his heart was happy. Then it was
That hell came. I sat gazing over there
Across the water, watching the sun's last fire
Above those gloomy and indifferent trees
That might have been a wall around the world,
When suddenly, like faces over the lake,
Out of the silence of that other shore
I was aware of hidden presences
That soon, no matter how many of them there
were,

Would all be one. I could not look behind me,
Where I could hear that one of them was breathing,
For, if I did, those others over there
Might all see that at last I was afraid;
And I might hear them without seeing them,
Hearing that other one. You were not there;
And it is well for you that you don't know
What they are like when they should not be there.
And there were chilly doubts of whether or not
I should be seeing the rest that I should see
With eyes, or otherwise. I could not be sure;
And as for going over to find out,
All I may tell you now is that my fear
Was not the fear of dying, though I knew soon
That all the gold in all the sunken ships
That have gone down since Tyre would not have
paid

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For me the ferriage of myself alone
To that infernal shore. I was in hell,
Remember; and if you have never been there
You may as well not say how easy it is
To find the best way out. There may not be one.
Well, I was there; and I was there alone —
Alone for the first time since I was born;
And I was not alone. That's what it is
To be in hell. I hope you will not go there.
All through that slow, long, desolating twilight
Of incoherent certainties, I waited;
Never alone — never to be alone;
And while the night grew down upon me there,
I thought of old Prometheus in the story
That I had read at school, and saw mankind
All huddled into clusters in the dark,
Calling to God for light. There was a light

Coming for them, but there was none for me
Until a shapeless remnant of a moon
Rose after midnight over the black trees
Behind me. I should hardly have confessed
The heritage then of my identity
To my own shadow; for I was powerless there,
As I am here. Say what you like to say
To silence, but say none of it to me
Tonight. To say it now would do no good,
And you are here to listen. Beware of hate,
And listen. Beware of hate, remorse, and fear,
And listen. You are staring at the damned,
But yet you are no more the one than he
To say that it was he alone who planted
The flower of death now growing in his garden.
Was it enough, I wonder, that I struck him?
I shall say nothing. I shall have to wait

Until I see what's coming, if it comes,
When I'm a delver in another garden —
If such an one there be. If there be none,
All's well — and over. Rather a vain expense,
One might affirm — yet there is nothing lost.
Science be praised that there is nothing lost."

I'm glad the venom that was on his tongue
May not go down on paper; and I'm glad
No friend of mine alive, far as I know,
Has a tale waiting for me with an end
Like Avon's. There was here an interruption,
Though not a long one — only the while we heard,
As we had heard before, the ghost of steps
Faintly outside. We knew that she was there
Again; and though it was a kindly folly,
I wished that Avon's wife would go to sleep.

" I was afraid, this time, but not of man —
Or man as you may figure him," he said.
" It was not anything my eyes had seen
That I could feel around me in the night,
There by that lake. If I had been alone,
There would have been the joy of being free,
Which in imagination I had won
With unimaginable expiation —
But I was not alone. If you had seen me,
Waiting there for the dark and looking off
Over the gloom of that relentless water,
Which had the stillness of the end of things
That evening on it, I might well have made
For you the picture of the last man left
Where God, in his extinction of the rest,
Had overlooked him and forgotten him.
Yet I was not alone. Interminably

The minutes crawled along and over me,
Slow, cold, intangible, and invisible,
As if they had come up out of that water.
How long I sat there I shall never know,
For time was hidden out there in the black lake,
Which now I could see only as a glimpse
Of black light by the shore. There were no stars
To mention, and the moon was hours away
Behind me. There was nothing but myself,
And what was coming. On my breast I felt
The touch of death, and I should have died then.
I ruined good Asher's autumn as it was,
For he will never again go there alone,
If ever he goes at all. Nature did ill
To darken such a faith in her as his,
Though he will have it that I had the worst
Of her defection, and will hear no more

Apologies. If it had to be for someone,
I think it well for me it was for Asher.
I dwell on him, meaning that you may know him
Before your last horn blows. He has a name
That's like a tree, and therefore like himself —
By which I mean you find him where you leave
him.
I saw him and The Admiral together
While I was in the dark, but they were far —
Far as around the world from where I was;
And they knew nothing of what I saw not
While I knew only I was not alone.
I made a fire to make the place alive,
And locked the door. But even the fire was dead,
And all the life there was was in the shadow
It made of me. My shadow was all of me;
The rest had had its day, and there was night

Remaining — only night, that's made for shadows,
Shadows and sleep and dreams, or dreams without it.
The fire went slowly down, and now the moon,
Or that late wreck of it, was coming up;
And though it was a martyr's work to move,
I must obey my shadow, and I did.
There were two beds built low against the wall,
And down on one of them, with all my clothes on,
Like a man getting into his own grave,
I lay — and waited. As the firelight sank,
The moonlight, which had partly been consumed
By the black trees, framed on the other wall
A glimmering window not far from the ground.
The coals were going, and only a few sparks
Were there to tell of them; and as they died

The window lightened, and I saw the trees.
They moved a little, but I could not move,
More than to turn my face the other way;
And then, if you must have it so, I slept.
We'll call it so — if sleep is your best name
For a sort of conscious, frozen catalepsy
Wherein a man sees all there is around him
As if it were not real, and he were not
Alive. You may call it anything you please
That made me powerless to move hand or foot,
Or to make any other living motion
Than after a long horror, without hope,
To turn my face again the other way.
Some force that was not mine opened my eyes,
And, as I knew it must be,— it was there."

Avon covered his eyes — whether to shut
The memory and the sight of it away,
Or to be sure that mine were for the moment
Not searching his with pity, is now no matter.
My glance at him was brief, turning itself
To the familiar pattern of his rug,
Wherein I may have sought a consolation —
As one may gaze in sorrow on a shell,
Or a small apple. So it had come, I thought;
And heard, no more with any wonderment,
The faint recurring footsteps of his wife,
Who, knowing less than I knew, yet knew more.
Now I could read, I fancied, through the fear
That latterly was living in her eyes,
To the sure source of its authority.
But he went on, and I was there to listen:

"And though I saw it only as a blot
Between me and my life, it was enough
To make me know that he was watching there —
Waiting for me to move, or not to move,
Before he moved. Sick as I was with hate,
Reborn, and chained with fear that was more than
fear,
I would have gambled all there was to gain
Or lose in rising there from where I lay
And going out after it. 'Before the dawn,'
I reasoned, 'that will be a difference here.
Therefore it may as well be done outside.'
And then I found I was immovable,
As I had been before; and a dead sweat
Rolled out of me as I remembered him
When I had seen him leaving me at school.
'I shall know where you are until you die,'

Were the last words that I had heard him say;
And there he was. Now I could see his face,
And all the sad, malignant desperation
That was drawn on it after I had struck him,
And on my memory since that afternoon.
But all there was left now for me to do
Was to lie there and see him while he squeezed
His unclean outlines into the dim room,
And half erect inside, like a still beast
With a face partly man's, came slowly on
Along the floor to the bed where I lay,
And waited. I had waited for so long
That I began to fancy there was on me
The stupor that explorers have alleged
As evidence of nature's final mercy
When tigers have them down upon the earth
And wild hot breath is heavy on their faces.

I could not feel his breath, but I could hear it;
Though fear had made an anvil of my heart
Where demons, for the joy of doing it,
Were sledging death down on it. And I saw
His eyes now, as they were, for the first time—
Aflame as they had never been before
With all their gathered vengeance gleaming in
them,
And always that unconscionable sorrow
That would not die behind it. Then I caught
The shadowy glimpse of an uplifted arm,
And a moon-flash of metal. That was all. . . .

"When I believed I was alive again
I was with Asher and The Admiral,
Whom Asher had brought with him for a day
With nature. That's about the whole of it,

Except the thing there on the dictionary.
They found it on me with the point of it
Touching my throat. I had not moved since then;
And it was not for some uncertain hours
After they came that either would say how long
That might have been. It should have been much
longer.
All you may add will be your own invention,
For I have told you all there is to tell.
Tomorrow I shall have another birthday,
And with it there may come another message —
Although I cannot see the need of it.
You may as well take that thing home with you,
And so be sure that I'm not using it.
They may arrest you, but good night! — and
thank you."
He smiled, but I would rather he had not.

I wished that Avon's wife would go to sleep,
But whether she found sleep that night or not
I do not know. I was awake for hours,
Toiling in vain to let myself believe
That Avon's apparition was a dream,
And that he might have added, for romance,
The rest of it which I had taken away
For reasons not in Avon's dictionary.
But each recurrent memory of his eyes,
And of the man himself that I had known
So long and well, made soon of all my toil
An evanescent and a vain evasion;
And it was half as in expectancy
That I obeyed the summons of his wife
A little before dawn, and was again
With Avon in the room where I had left him,
But not with the same Avon I had left.

The doctor, an august authority,
With eminence abroad as well as here,
Looked hard at me as if I were the doctor
And he the friend. "I have had eyes on Avon
For more than half a year," he said to me,
"And I have wondered often what it was
That I could see that I was not to see.
Though he was in the chair where you are looking,
I told his wife — I had to tell her something —
It was a nightmare and an aneurism;
And so, or partly so, I'll say it was.
The last without the first will be enough
For the newspapers and the undertaker;
Yet if we doctors were not all immune
From death, disease, and curiosity,
My diagnosis would be sorry for me.
He died, you know, because he was afraid —

And he had been afraid for a long time;
And we who knew him well would all agree
To fancy there was rather more than fear.
The door was locked inside — they broke it in
To find him — but she heard him when it came.
There are no signs of any visitors,
Or need of them. If I were not a child
Of science, I should say it was the devil.
I don't believe it was another woman,
And surely it was not another man."

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